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A diagnostic test is provided for spongiform encephalopathy and other demyelinating conditions in mammals which comprises assaying antibodies present in the mammal which bind to an antigenic peptide which exhibits molecular mimicry of a mammalian myelin peptide, e.g. one having the sequence FSWGAEQGK. This test is useful for detecting BSE in cattle by assaying sera collected from the cattle for antibodies to a species of *Acinetobacter*, *Agrobacterium* or *Ruminococcus*, or a peptide having a sequence present in said species which mimics a peptide of bovine myelin and identifying animals having a level of antibodies at least about two standard deviations above that of healthy control animals.